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ABSTRACT

Radio rhetoric is set apart from traditional rhetoric by the efficacy it commands. This study focuses on rhetorical perspective in radio communication, noting 10 identifiable aspects of radio rhetoric noteworthy in undertaking rhetorical criticism: (1) the pressures of federal regulations which require balanced presentation affect preparation; (2) time is strictly limited; (3) radio is an intimate medium, requiring conversational presentation; (4) there are special demands on both writing style and oral interpretation because the audience cannot see the speaker; (5) the speaker's voice assumes greater importance on radio than in traditional speech; (6) the speaker is required to make operational adaptations; (7) the speaker usually addresses one segment of a diverse audience; (8) radio precludes immediate, circular feedback from the listeners; (9) radio creates an efficacy of its own; and (10) radio further creates a sense of exigence and fulfillment. It is concluded that radio, when artfully used, can form opinion and guide action above all other forms of communication. (TS)

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Rhetorical Perspectives in Radio Communications

The Speaker and the Loudspeaker

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Rhetorical Perspectives in Radio Communications

The Speaker and the Loudspeaker

by

Donald G. Godfrey

On a winter afternoon in 1958, Professor Milo Ryan sat correcting papers. Suddenly the hallway echoed with running footsteps, which stopped at Ryan's door. A graduate student from the CBS-KIRO Phonoarchive appeared, panting. "His eyes were popping out of his head," Ryan recalls.

"Mr. Ryan, you've got to come down here!" gasped the student. "The greatest thing has just happened. The Germans have been driven out of Stalingrad!" Although that historic event had occurred fifteen years earlier, for the student listening to the broadcast coverage, the living, vivid re-creation before him had brought history to life.[1]

Professor Ryan, lunching with colleauges from the departments of speech, communications, sociology, history and polititcal science, pondered the question, "What makes these broadcasts live?" But there were no substantive replies.[2] The question remains unanswered. What are the factors which make words aired by radio different in impact from traditional speech?

Radio was born in 1901 when Guglielmo Marconi succeeded in sending a signal of dots and dashes across the Atlantic from England to Newfoundland. From the beginning of its popular development in the early 1920's, radio has been not only a disseminator of entertainment, but a channel for important

informative and sausory discourse.

Most historians agree that regular broadcasting in the United States began October 2, 1920. That was the day on which KDKA, Westinghouse, in Pittsburgh, broadcast the Cox-Harding election returns. The first commercial was broadcast from WEAF (now WNBC), in New York seven years later. A far cry from modern commercial messages, it was a ten-minute speech in behalf of a New York realtor.

Throughout World War II, radio brought the war to every American family. Edward R. Murrow, H.V. Kaltenborn, and others carried the fighting from the battlefields of Europe into the living rooms of America, where listeners huddled around their receiving sets to hear the latest news. Today, radio is still an important disseminator of news and information, as well as the medium best suited to on-the-spot coverage.

What is it that distinguishes radio speech from other forms of rhetoric? Are there perspectives on radio which the rhetorical critic should note?

Marshal McLuhan indicates that broadcast sound creates audience participation. "They danced entranced to the tribal drum of radio that extended their central nervouse system to create depth involvement for everybody,"[3] he wrote.

Although the speech, the speaker, the message and the audience would be of primary concern to the traditional critic, McLuhan would argue that the "medium is the message." The medium itself adds a dimension of meaning. Although McLuhan does not suggest radical changes in the approach to speech education, he intimates that there are unique characteristics of face-to-face versus media communication that should be taken into account.

Aristotle wrote, "The style of written prose is not that of spoken oratory."[4] It appears at first glance that this sight and sound distinction alone would account for the difference between response to a broadcast speech and to its written text.

Existing studies which employ that approach are limited in perspective. Horowitz and Newman theorize that the spoken word is more productive and produces "greater proliferation of material," and that "spoken expression manifests itself in more repetitions of words, phrases, and sentences."[5] DeVito reports that oral language is "significantly less abstract and contains more finite verbs and less nouns of abstraction than written language."[6]

In an attempt to design a new experiment which would identify those aspects unique to speech broadcast by radio, it was thought that a record of broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow played to one group of students and given in written form to another group would yield results. But conversations with colleagues and preliminary experimental procedures suggested that such a study--although it would be interesting--would not yield results generalizable to radio as a unique rhetorical medium. Murrow probably would be rated as significantly more emotive in oral expression than on paper. But that finding does not offer new insights. Elmer Davis, in his preface to This Is London, wrote, "The reader might remember that this language is the language of speech and not the printed page; all this was designed to be heard, not read."[7]

So not wanting to limit the study to contrasting Murrow's written and oral effectiveness, it became the purpose of this study to focus on rhetorical perspectives in radio communication. This paper states the identifiable aspects of radio rhetoric noteworthy in undertaking rhetorical criticism.

Historical Significance

The sausory powers of radio are widely discussed, particularly in advertising circles concerned with their effect on our daily living and buying habits. Their social effects, however, are not limited to the economic sphere. Throughout history, other effects have appeared, sometimes dramatically.

On Halloween weekend, 1938, Orson Welles produced a program called "The War of the Worlds."[8] Response to that program demonstrated radio's motivating influence. As late as 1969, when WJR, Detroit, rebroadcast the original program as an historical novelty, though panic was not induced as on the earlier date, listeners did call the station for reassurance.[9]

Just as radio can arouse fear, it has the potential for positive impact. In 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered his first inaugural address to an audience of millions, assuring them that the only thing they had to fear was fear itself.

Reacting to Roosevelt's fireside chats on the "New Deal," critics Huey P. Long and Father Charles Coughlin hammered their platforms of "social justice" and "share our wealth", using the medium of radio. In Father Coughlin's series, he constantly criticized the New Deal. Meanwhile, Huey Long exerted similar pressure in his home state of Louisiana, where he owned--and used--both radio stations and newspapers. After only four radio appearances, Long had recruited more than five million for his "Share Our Wealthy Society."[10]

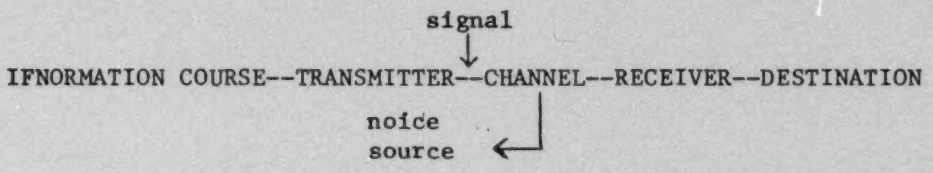
Father Coughlin generated support almost exclusively via radio. He was not a well-known figure before his broadcasts began. But after a few months of periodic braodcasting, he had drawn lsiteners and shaped audience attitudes to secure a membership of nearly eight million in his National Union effort.

Just minutes after President Roosevelt's address on the banking crisis of March 5, 1933, he began to receive by telegraph unequivocal evidence of public response to the broadcast.[11]

Rhetorical Implications of Radio Communication

In identifying the rhetorical aspects of radio speech, we turn to the communications model as a point of reference, tracing the course of communication from information source to destination.

The "standard" model varies somewhat, depending on one's orientation--traditional speech, psychological or electronic. For this study, we selected Warren Weaver;s model from "The Mathematics of Communication."[12] This model combines electronic and traditional speech.



The information source (preparator) prepares the message. The transmitter (speaker) adapts the message to the channel (radio) over which he is to transmit that message to the receiver (audience). Each listener then translates it and responds, thus bringing the message to its destination.

Within the channel, the signal (speech) may have uncontrollable variables exerted upon it--noice factors, distortions in sound, static, errors and/or omissions in the electronic transmission--all of which can change its message. But in this discussion, we are concerned only with the controllable variables--circumstances of the transmission, audience expectations of the channel and the genre of the channel itself.

Information and "talk" programming have not been the dominant program forms of radio, but they still have been a force to be considered in the dissemination of sausory discourse. It is the political speech and/or program that is typical of this type of broadcasting.

INFORMATION SOURCE AND TRANSMITTER
(or Preparator and Speaker)

The radio speaker must make special preparation for using the medium of radio. The realm of political propaganda brings to radio speech the first limitation which gives rise to a characteristic aspect. The broadcaster must abide by federal regulation in regard to balanced presentation. He is governed by Section 315 of the Communications Act and by the so-called "Fairness Doctrine."

Under Section 315, the broadcaster who allows a candidate to speak is required to extend the same opportunity for expression to all candidates for the same office. Equal opportunity is defined as an equal amount of time of equal value for equal consideration. The station may assign a producer or a writer to assist the politician, but the broadcaster cannot censor the material.[13]

The Fairness Doctrine further encroaches on both the broadcaster and the speaker. It applies to controversial issues, political editorializing and personal attacks. The broadcaster who airs material of a controversial nature must offer the opposition "reasonable opportunity" to respond to the material presented. If the presentation verbally attacks someone, or advocates one point of view on a controversial issue, the broadcaster is obligated to seek out the opposition and offer an opportunity for response.

Section 315 and the Fairness Doctrine means to the speaker that the pressures of these regulations are reasserted from the station management to him. His speed, therefore, must be prepared so as not to offend the Fairness Doctrine. To do so would cost him time and money for the response, and could cost him future opportunities to broadcast.

The second aspect is time. The speaker's air time is limited. He cannot afford to waste time in rambling. The speaker needs to know exactly how much time is scheduled, must calculate his rate of delivery. If the speech is to run fifteen minutes and his rate of delivery is 150 words a minute, he should prepare 2100 words (or approximately 7 1/2 pages) of copy, plus a short (30 second) "pad." He cannot digress from that text or he's likely to have his conclusion cut off by a mouthwash commercial. Unfortunately, in facing time decisions it is not the commercial which is deleted from the program.

The third aspect is one of audience consideration in preparing the broadcast. Radio is not a "mass medium"; people listen to it individually or in groups of two or three. The individual listener usally is in his home, or

driving or working. The radio audience is made up of individuals who President Roosevelt called "my friends" in his fireside chats. The speech, therefore, must be prepated conversationally, on a person-to-person basis.

In this respect, radio speech resembles traditional, fact-to-face speech, but there is still a slight difference. In the traditional setting, listeners are not likely to turn and walk away. Courtesy holds them, at least to some degree. But a person may change to another station without incurring social censure.

A fourth aspect is visual style. The radio listener is unaffected by such secondary stimuli as a gesture and changes of position, so the radio speaker must compensate, by a flexible use of his voice to interpret the message.

Listening without seeing the speaker is difficult; it requires concentration on every word. This makes the formal lecture difficult to deliver via radio. The context demands a simple writing style, since the listener has no way of referring back to something that was said earlier, nor can he dwell on any fact without losing what follows. Sentences must be shaped with extreme care for clarity, with simple sentences and straight forward logic, each point building up to the next.

The final aspect of the information source and transmitter--not so controllable as the others--is voice. Manser and Finlan indicate that in traditional speech, the voice helps establish an "atmosphere of harmony"[14] in any social setting. This is especially true in radio speech. A certain mystique accrues to the radio voice. If it is friendly, we respond to it and obey its commands. Huey P. Long sent people to the phone to tell others, "Huey P. Long is on the air." President Roosevelt instilled confidence in a crushed banking system, and Seth Parker kept many families hushed by his request for a moment of silent prayer.[15] Each used voice quality to elicit the desired response.

We associate certain characteristics with the different types of voices we hear on radio. A good voice belongs to a "good guy", while the "bad guy" sounds nasal, harsh, or has speech patterns deviant from the norm. In the late 1940's and early 1950's, many radio stars found it impossible to transfer to the visual medium of television because their physical features did not match the image which their voices had projected.

Historically, voice quality has been an important aspect of radio communication. People believe what their ears tell them. And although it can be misleading, voice quality is an important part of what makes both radio and television "believable" media.

CHANNEL, RECEIVER AND DESTINATION

(or Radio, Audience and Response)

The next aspect, induced by the channel, is that of broadcast-station environment. The physical setting for speech delivery by radio is completely different from the traditional. For the novice, it can be one of a seeming disorganization and confusion.

The station may be located in an old house on the outskirts of town, in two rooms of a typical office building, or in a specially-designed, plush structure. Its staff may be busy with their respective jobs, most of which have little to do with the speech. There is scant opportunity to "work up" for the delivery. There is seldom a supporting "atmosphere."

The speaker usually is given a cursory orientation: Don't rattle the papers, watch for the cue before you start to speak, don't move back and forth in front of the microphone, speak into the mike at this angle to get the best response, don't cough or clear your throat directly into the mike," etc. By the time the speaker has received all of these directions, the final and most important one, "Relax and be yourself," comes at a time when it could not be less

meaningful. The technical preparation and directions heighten tension to a different extent than do preliminaries to the traditional speech. Suddenly the cue is delivered and the speaker is supposed to take over.

During the speech, there is no audience to respond--only the cold microphone and a technician behind a window paying no attention to the message, but concentrating on the mechanics of transmission. The radio speaker must therefore be prepated to make the adjustments required for radio delivery. Such operational adaptation to the medium need not distort the message. The speaker can learn to focus his attention on the script and on the intended audience, overcoming studio distrations.

Radio as a medium creates a genre of its own. "The very transciency of the broadcast possesses fascination,"[16] intimacy, eventfulness and urgency. From this atmosphere and setting, exigence results. The audience then interprets the message, and hopefully its destination is a fulfillment of the urgency engendered.

Who listens to radio? The answer is, almost everyone; 99 percent of American homes have at least one radio receiver. How audiences listen and what they expect are more complex questions.

The picture of the average listener varies historically. During the early 1940's, he was an individual surrounded by his family at home in the evening. With the radio on, each individual was involved in an activity of his own. The family gathered around the set for news or a special program.

During World War II, radio fulfilled an urgent need. Radio involved people emotionally in the events of war, as on-site reporters captured the actual sounds of battle. "We are twice-scared by the emotionalism of radio, "wrote a contemporary author. Although it does not instigate the tensions, radio elongates the shadows of fear and frustration [created by the] mechanized columns of Hitler,"

he explained. "Radio exposes nearly everybody in a country to a rapid, bewildering succession of emotional experiences."[17]

While in this manner radio can undermine confidence and foster defeatism, it can also unify as it fulfills the exigency it creates. As wartime America was informed by radio, its morale and confidence was simultaneously lifted by encouraging words from its national leaders.

Today, radio's audience is diverse. The household huddle has moved from the radio to the television set. Radio still creates and then fulfills the same attitude of expectation, but each station plays to a segment of the total listening audience which tunes in for a particular reason--for a certain type of entertainment, background music, news or other information. So the nationwide impact of radio is correspondingly fragmented and galvanized only when a stunning event like the assassination of President Kennedy makes one audience of all Americans.

The next aspect is the absence of direct, immediate give-and-take between the speaker and a radio audience. This imposes a psychological barrier. If one is speaking too rapidly or too slowly, if the jokes fall flat or a point is not understood, the speaker has no way of knowing. His preparation may have taken into account the psychographics of his audience and he may have adapted his message accordingly, but there is no circular relationship. The social situation of radio communication is a linear one. Further, the speaker cannot depend upon group reaction such as laughter or applause to create a compact, unified audience. This helps explain why communicators often seem less enticing over radio than in assembly. The absence of this circular relationship between the performer and his audience places the emphasis on oral interpretation and fosters the imagination of an audience to the extent that the skeletonized situation presented may be completed by the mind of the participant.

Historically, it was the novelty of radio that first drew listeners. When

radio began to report live from the battlefield, the "eyewitness" accounts kept the audience around the set in increasing expectation. During World War II, listeners were totally dependent on the radio for immediate coverage, and they were emotionally involved by such reporters as Murrow, Kaltenborn, and Davis. These reporters fulfilled a need in the home audience, reporting and creating vicarious experience for their listeners.

Plato indicated that the size of the groups in which men can be governed depends upon the range of the human voice.[18] Radio certainly increased that range. Through the medium of radio, Winston Churchill brought courage to the Englishman; Hitler sent fear through Europe; Roosevelt unified America; and today, a host of reporters, politicians and performers bring the sounds of persuasion into the living room and automobile of nearly every American.

Summary and Conclusions

Radio is set apart from traditional rhetoric by the efficacy it commands. Physical differences in the setting and preparation are the least important among these. One can learn to adapt to the techniques of the medium much as the beginning speaker learns to take the podium and adapt his speech to a live audience.

What is that distinguishes radio speech from other forms of rhetoric? Are there perspectives on radio which the rhetorical critic should note?

This study suggests that there are at least ten:

1. Pressures of federal regulations which require "balanced" presentation affect preparation.

2. Time is strictly limited.

3. Radio is an intimate medium, requiring a conversational presentation.

4. With an audience that cannot see the speaker, there are special demands on both writing style and oral interpretation.

5. The speaker's voice quality assumes greater importance on radio than in traditional speech.

6. Technicalities of radio delivery require that the speaker make operational adaptations.

7. The radio speaker today usually addresses one segment of a diverse audience.

8. Radio precludes immediate, circular feedback from the listeners.

9. Radio creates an efficacy of its own, transmitting a sense of immediacy and involvement.

10. It further creates a sense of exigence and fulfillment.

Historically, a live audience exhibits a certain expectancy of trust, accuracy and immediacy, and ascribes these characteristics to the messages delivered. Through these psychological characteristics, radio--when artfully used--can form opinion and guide action above all other forms of communication.

Together, these perspectives show how radio can, indeed, make history come alive.

Notes

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5. Milton W. Horowitz and John B. Newman, "Spoken and Written Expression An Experimental Analysis," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, vol. 68, no. 6 (1964), pp. 640-47.

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7. Edward R. Murrow, This Is London (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1941), p. vii.

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10. Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, The Psychology of Radio (New York: Peter Smith, 1941), pp. 7-9.

11. Cantril and Allport, p. 32.

12. Warren Weaver, "The Mathematics of Communciation," in Communication and Culture, by Alfred G. Smith (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), pp. 16-17.

13. This is the only time when the broadcaster is not solely responsible for the material aired by his station.

14. Ruth B. Manser and Leonard Finlan, The Speaking Voice (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1962), pp. xi-xii.

15. Cantril and Allport, pp. 16-18.

16. Cantril and Allport, p. 18.

17. Alexander Kendrick, Prime Time: The Life of Edward R. Murrow (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969), p. 234.

18, Wector Dixon, "Hearing Is Believing," Atlantic Monthly, June, 1945, p. 54.